

**THE ROLLBACK OF SOUTH
AFRICA'S BIOLOGICAL
WARFARE PROGRAM**

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FOREWORD

We are pleased to publish this thirtieth-seventh volume in the *Occasional Paper* series of the US Air Force Institute for National Security Studies (INSS). A series of United States commissions and studies has identified proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) as the nation's number one national security threat entering the 21st Century. Nonproliferation, counterproliferation, and homeland defense efforts are all receiving added emphasis to address that threat. Understanding the dynamics of proliferation is just a small part of that new security emphasis, and South Africa presents a unique and valuable case study of the motivations, mechanisms, and programs employed in WMD proliferation and in the decisions and actions taken to reverse that proliferation.

This paper represents the second INSS Occasional Paper addressing South Africa's proliferation and its reversal. Roy Horton's August 1999 *Out of (South) Africa: Pretoria's Nuclear Weapons Experience* is a valuable companion piece to Steve Burgess' and Helen Purkitt's detailed examination of the South African chemical and biological weapons program presented here. The strength of this paper is not only in its detailed history of the birth, development, and rollback of the CBW effort, but also in its vivid message of the complexity, uncertainty, and danger of even supposedly managed dismantlement of covert, largely unregulated, and mostly invisible weapons programs. The danger in CBW lies not only in its development or potential use, but in ever having certainty of its disposition and the real state of its overall threat. The questions remaining at the end of this paper speak volumes to the difficulties faced in the proliferation arena.

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JAMES M. SMITH
Director

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The profile of South Africa is of an increasingly isolated state that felt threatened by a more powerful state actor and hostile regimes and movements in neighboring states. One response of the *apartheid* regime to changing threat perceptions in the region was to develop a chemical and biological warfare (CBW) program, along with continued support for a nuclear weapons program, to counter perceived threats. The decision-making process, which was secretive and controlled by the military, enabled a sophisticated program to be developed with little outside scrutiny. Military and police units used chemical and biological agents for counter-insurgency warfare, assassination, and execution of war prisoners. Increasingly, the *apartheid* regime felt threatened by growing political opposition at home that supported the liberation armies' goal of achieving majority rule through the use of illegal and violent means. The regime's increasingly vulnerable position led to plans for research and development of exotic means to neutralize domestic opponents, as well as weaponization and large-scale offensive uses of the program. However, these plans were not operationalized. The end of the external threat led to a decision to negotiate with political opponents and unilaterally dismantle CBN programs. However, extensive external pressures by the US, UK and other countries were required to ensure roll back of biological and chemical programs. This dismantlement process proved to be a slow and difficult to implement due to the lack of civilian control over military programs. Subsequent revelations that the former director of Project Coast, Dr. Wouter Basson, had secretly retained copies of classified documents previously thought to be under limited government control, fuels continuing proliferation concerns in place. Today a divide exists between those who believe that South Africa developed one of the most sophisticated biological (and chemical)

warfare programs and are concerned about proliferation and those who believe that Project Coast was a “pedestrian” program. The latter are focused more on the criminality and corruption of the program.